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Viewing cable 06MANAGUA2248, CODEL BURTON MEETS WITH EDMUNDO JARQUIN, FORMER

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06MANAGUA2248	2006-10-11 00:08	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Managua

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SUBJECT: CODEL BURTON MEETS WITH EDMUNDO JARQUIN, FORMER
CONTRAS, ELECTION OBSERVERS, AND PRESIDENT BOLANOS

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: This cable provides a readout of several meetings Congressman Dan Burton held with various members of the political class during his 22-24 September visit. The congressman spoke with Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS) candidate Edmundo Jarquin during which Jarquin reaffirmed his commitment to opposing Daniel Ortega. The following day he met with several former Contras who are members of the Nicaraguan Resistance Party (PRN). These former guerrillas eloquently discussed their support for Eduardo Montealegre and disdain for the political pact between Arnoldo Aleman and Ortega, which they see as having corroded Nicaragua's democracy. Burton next met with representatives from the various organizations (i.e. USAID, OAS, IFES) who are helping to reinforce the electoral institutions here with an eye toward ensuring a clean and fair election. The members said that while nothing could guarantee a clean election, it was possible to minimize the potential for fraud with sufficient planning, a strong observation effort, and a drive to bolster attendance at the polls. Finally, Burton discussed the election with President Enrique Bolanos, who was optimistic about Montealegre's chances despite campaign funding problems. END SUMMARY.

Edmundo Jarquin
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¶2. (C) Edmundo Jarquin began the meeting by talking about his FSLN roots, and said he had never really been a die-hard party member. He acknowledged that he had been involved in the Sandinista government in various roles, but described these as more technical than political. He described the progression of the MRS and its formation around Herty Lewites, and the way he has sought to carry on Herty's legacy, while at the same time stamping his own persona on the campaign. He then talked about the broad mass of support his Sandinista Renovation Front (MRS) has developed from Sandinistas disenchanted with Daniel Ortega as well as that of independent voters. While he did not provide a figure, he assured Burton that he was taking votes away from Ortega. He said the MRS has developed a particular appeal to younger voters who are disillusioned with traditional parties and politics.

¶3. (C) Jarquin told Burton that the recent Greenberg poll - which had Ortega at (28%), Montealegre (24%), Jarquin (20%), and Rizo (14%) is an indication that he and the MRS are still picking up more votes and thus have room to grow. Jarquin thought that some of this increase was the result of his performance in the CNN-sponsored debate between the candidates (which most analysts say he won hands down). He indicated that he was surprised Montealegre's performance - which he characterized as positive - had not seemed to have much of an effect on his standings.

14. (C) When asked by Burton whether he was against Ortega, Jarquin said "absolutely" and that the FSLN would do everything they could to secure a first-round win because they know that he cannot win in a second round. He said the broad mass of non-FSLN voters would swing to the strongest anti-Ortega candidate closer to the election. He said that MRS voter analysis indicated that under such conditions, 80% of Montealegre supporters would swing toward him, and vice versa, because their motivation/inclination is predominantly anti-pact.

15. (C) Jarquin reported that he was surprised that Rizo had even maintained 14% at this point, because he has been so tarnished and clearly considered an Aleman pawn. When asked by Burton if he would ever go into some kind of coalition with Ortega, he said "no way," and added that the majority of his supporters were anti-Ortega and would not stand for such an agreement. In response to a question by Burton whether Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez was supporting the FSLN, he replied "of course" but that most Nicaraguans reject the Chavez connection. Burton concluded the meeting by congratulating him for his battle against Ortega and wished him well in his campaign.

Former Contras: Montealegre Strong, Rizo Weak,
Ortega-Aleman Pact Dangerous

16. (C) Congressman Burton, Ambassador, and Polcouns and met with four former Contra leaders who are now members of the Nicaraguan Resistance Party (PRN) backing Eduardo Montealegre's Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance (ALN) to discuss the strength of the ALN campaign and the political pact

between Arnoldo Aleman and Daniel Ortega. The PRN members present were Luis Fley (Comandante "Johnson"), Jose Angel Talavera ("Chacal"), Encarnacion Valdivia ("Tigrillo"), and Oscar Sobalvarro. Talavera kicked off the meeting by asserting that the PRN is one of the ALN's strongest components and noted that his brother's (Salvador Talavera) recent defection to the FSLN was part of a grand plan to embarrass the ALN. He added that PRN leaders think Daniel Ortega is afraid of Montealegre and considers him a threat to victory, which explains the underhanded tactics he is using against him.

17. (C) The former resistance fighters see Montealegre as the best solution to Nicaragua's problems. While they acknowledge that he may not be able to solve all of Nicaragua's problems, he can be counted on to oppose the Ortega-Aleman pact and fight corruption. They added that diversity of his alliance proves Montealegre has widespread backing. The PRN members said that their organization provides a significant boost to the ALN, estimating that the PRN has about 6,000 grassroots supporters throughout the country. Moreover, they discounted as myth the assumption that the PLC has a strong party machinery to fall back on. Fley asked rhetorically where that strength was when the PLC suffered such a large defeat in the 2004 municipal elections. He said that the PLC lost 53 municipalities and now controls only two of the 17 Departments.

18. (C) Echoing this point, Talavera noted that the structure of the PLC has been disorganized while the ALN has made gains. One PRN leader speculated that more PLC supporters are likely to weigh in behind Montealegre closer to the election if he continues to dominate the polls. They noted, however, that a lack of resources is the biggest challenge to Montealegre's campaign. They said that additional funding will become all the more of a necessity as the party puts itself in a position to fight back against the 'dirty campaign' launched by the PLC and FSLN to smear Montealegre's name.

19. (C) In response to a question from Burton, Talavera insisted that there was plenty of proof that Rizo is

beholden to Aleman. For instance, he (Rizo) was forced to accept Aleman's decisions over who would compose the party's slate of deputies, and he was only allowed to select one candidate. He noted that Aleman did the same thing with Bolanos, keeping a tight control over the party apparatus by picking loyalists to fill the bulk of party positions. Other PRN members opined that Rizo may not be happy with this arrangement, but lacks the strength to stand up to Aleman.

¶10. (C) All four PRN leaders expressed certainty that the Aleman-Ortega pact is not only still active, but is the most prevalent threat to democracy in Nicaragua. They explained to Burton that this agreement stands at the very center of the ability of the PLC and FSLN to control the National Assembly, the courts, and other critical institutions. Talavera explained that Ortega and Aleman share the same motivations -- the desire to entrench their own personal power -- and noted that a victory by either the PLC or the FSLN in the election would be equally damaging. One of the PRN members told his audience that the PLC and FSLN have an agreement to alternate periods in office, but that Ortega, if victorious, would back out of this deal, assert greater control over the government, and attempt to extend his time in office for as long as possible. He pointed out that as long as Aleman is in jail, Ortega will have the upper hand in their relationship. He has forced Aleman into making concessions by threatening to return him with stricter terms of confinement or with returning him to jail.

Election Observers: Guardedly Pleased With Election Support Efforts

¶11. (C) Burton, the Ambassador, and Polcouns met with representatives from various organizations involved in bolstering the election process, including USAID, the OAS, and NGOs such as IRI, NDI, and IFES. Burton asked how, given partisan control over the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE), a clean election is possible. The CEPPS partners responded that while nothing could guarantee a clean election, it was possible to minimize the potential for fraud with sufficient planning, a strong observation effort, and a drive to bolster attendance at the polls. IFES is training CSE staff at the Departmental, Municipal, and poll levels to ensure electoral officials are properly trained to handle election day activities and the electoral complaint process. The CEPPS partners said that the ability of all parties to

have one political party pollwatcher assigned to each JRV to protect party votes will also help to provide an extra layer of scrutiny over the process. Attendees said that the domestic and international observer mission will be key to the success of the election, and USAID affirmed that the domestic observers will be mounting a comprehensive effort.

¶12. (C) A USAID representative noted that the national observation mission will be the second largest in history (second only to Indonesia), and the OAS international observer mission will be the longest OAS mission conducted to date. The OAS noted that all this provides impartial observers with more opportunities to denounce fraud than was present in the 2001 elections. The IRI representative reported that CSE complaints over efforts to educate poll watchers may well be a sign that their efforts are working. The OAS representative noted that his organization would be meeting with Ortega in order to discuss Ortega's recent criticism of the OAS efforts -- he has charged that the US is using the OAS mission as a tool to manipulate the results of the election.

¶13. (C) The Ambassador noted that voter turnout will be key; the larger the turnout, the harder it will be for Ortega to manipulate the outcome. With this in mind, the Embassy is supporting an extensive 'get out the vote' campaign, with voter education drives (including in universities and high schools), rock concerts, t-shirts, media interviews, etc. There are some signs that these efforts are paying off. Since the beginning of the year, for instance, over 200,000

cedulas (voter IDs) have been issued, and in recent months another 200,000 people have applied. While these latter may not receive their cedulas ahead of the election, the CSE is in the process of distributing temporary cards with pictures that will allow the holders to participate in the national elections and a possible runoff. Although the CSE cedula distribution efforts have been delayed -- according to an NDI study only about 18% of applicants have received their cards -- the OAS is recommending the CSE accept people's receipts from when they applied for the cedula as a backup for voters who do not receive documentation prior to election day. The OAS noted that this solution was adopted earlier this year during the Atlantic Coast regional elections. The voting population may have expanded considerably from previous years.

¶14. (C) To add pressure on the CSE to ensure that results are not significantly tampered with after they have been sent for tabulation, both the OAS and Ethics and Transparency, the local chapter of Transparency International, will be doing quick-counts. This will provide an accurate idea of what the results should look like for the presidential race and a few legislative races within hours after polls close, serving as a deterrent against manipulation of electoral results. Burton concluded, saying that "this is very impressive" and that this ought to be "an example to the whole world for how to help an election."

President Bolanos Urges Support for Montealegre and Pans Rizo

¶15. (C) Burton and the Ambassador met with President Enrique Bolanos to discuss the elections and Montealegre's candidacy. Bolanos welcomed his visitors and started the meeting by lamenting the current problem of people falling victim to tainted alcohol. (Comment: In recent weeks criminals selling bootleg liquor laced with methanol have caused injury to over 700 people, predominantly in Leon. End Comment.) The President had spent much of the morning in Leon where he visited hospitals that are treating the victims. Bolanos said that the death toll now stands at 50, and that he had met with the family of five children whose mother had just passed away.

¶16. (C) Moving on to the issue of the election, Burton queried Bolanos over the origins of the Aleman-Ortega pact. Bolanos replied that this history is somewhat murky, but pointed that relations between the two caudillos took a noticeable change in 2003 when Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo took a trip to Rome. Bolanos said that during his absence, Sandinistas -- ordered by Lenin Cerna -- broke into the Cardinal's house, stole his safe, and photocopied its contents. As the Cardinal had at the time been a close Aleman ally, it is suspected that the FSLN gained access to incriminating information that has enabled the party to dominate both Aleman and the Cardinal.

¶17. (C) Discussing the strength of the PLC, Bolanos noted that the PLC still retains much of its former strength and enjoys a history, albeit brief, of being the dominant centrist party. He said that many people, particularly in rural areas, think that Montealegre is still with the PLC, and will cast their vote for the PLC casilla, believing they are in fact voting for Montealegre. Bolanos suggested that the best hope for defeating Ortega would be for some kind of deal that unites Rizo and Montealegre. He said "I have been trying to help them get together" for some time, but that the difficulty was that one person would have to step down. Bolanos also noted that Rizo probably sees stepping down and away from the PLC as political suicide. The chances of Rizo challenging Aleman are also remote as he has no strength within the party. One of Bolanos's advisers who was present in the meeting noted that of the diehard PLC voter base (he estimated at 12% of the population) the vast majority remain loyal to Aleman while only a handful are attracted by Rizo or his running mate Jose Antonio Alvarado. Bolanos noted that

Rizo is weak. "As my vice president he, in all his meetings with the Cabinet, never managed to carry across a point."

¶18. (C) Bolanos noted that Montealegre's biggest obstacle is raising enough money to sustain a strong campaign, speculating that Montealegre has only managed to raise about \$5 million. However, he remained optimistic of Montealegre's chances of winning in November. Bolanos appeared to base his optimism more on his own track record of having overcome significant political obstacles during his administration rather than on any real political evidence. Bolanos said "I dream that we can beat both of them," referring to Aleman and Ortega and told Burton to "have faith," saying that "I have the support of only 9 out of 90 votes in the Congress, and nevertheless we managed to pass some legislation." He noted that while the going has been tough, Bolanos and his team have managed to have some success in reducing some of the pacto ability to influence the election. For example, recently his administration was able to push the CSE to adopt changes to the electoral procedure that theoretically makes it harder for polling places to negate ballots. (Comment: Bolanos was probably referring to a recent change in which the CSE raised from one to two the number of signatures required by JRV members to nullify a ballot box. End Comment.).

¶19. (C) Bolanos suggested to Burton that the United States take care to word its public messages in a more positive light. For instance, rather than issuing a tough reminder of how bad Ortega would be, to instead offer how the two countries would have the opportunity with a democratic candidate, to move forward and consolidate the close friendship between the two countries. Burton responded, saying "You are a very wise man." Bolanos joked that while he was old, he was still capable. He pointed out that upon taking office he was older than former President Ronald Reagan when he was elected.
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